

BOOK REVIEWS

Anna Karenina. By Leo Tolstoy. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992. Hardcover, ISBN0-679-41000-7.

We owe Leo Tolstoy gratitude for a profound exploration of humanity in a time of radical transformation. His *Anna Karenina* is a classic whose thought-provocative presentations of human nature, will, dispositions (such as love, betray, infidelity, and jealousy), desires (for power, ranks, sexual intimacy, and possession), alienation in mask and hypocrisy, the institutions of family and marriage in a time of radical change, reforms of society, practices, and humans themselves, as well as beliefs in God, homeland, and in humans themselves still resonate well and profoundly with us today. It is a classic whose insights into humanity were true and profound yesterday, are true and profound today, and will continue to be true and profound tomorrow.

The nineteenth century, like ours, was an age of fundamental, profound social transformation and re-structure, accompanied by radical intellectual, ethical-moral ferment. Humanity, its best and its worst, as embodied in a group of illustrative protagonists Anna A. Karenina (Arkadyevna Karenina), Alexei Kirillovich Vronsky, Konstantin "Kostya" Dmitrievich Levin, Alexei Alexandrovich Karenin, Stephan Arkadyevich Oblonsky, Dolly Oblonskaya, Ekaterina "Kitty" Alexandrovna Shcherbatskaya, Sergei Koznyshev, Nikolai Dmitrievich Levin, Betsy Tverskaya, Lidia Ivanovna, Sergius Ivanovich Koznyshev, and various others, is exposed in the vistas of the past that is distilled, present that is still novel, and future that is in pregnancy. More specifically, humanity is exposed in the background wherein the old Russia is challenged and reformed, and a new Russia dawned at the horizon and Russian economy and social institutions including government, laws, media, army, education, and art were under radical reforms and transformations. It is exposed in human struggle in change, openness, radical uncertainty, and historical embedment.

Tolstoy's heroine Anna A. Karenina is an embodiment of humanity in cross-road. "In addition to her intelligence, grace, and beauty, she also possesses sincerity."(p.824) She read new books and was hungry but gifted for knowledge. She searched for herself and true happiness. She lived for love and died for love. Unhappily married and driven by the raging storm of passion for true love, she fell into love with the equally passion-consumed, dashing handsome Count Vronsky. They started a love affair that eventually ended in Anna's tragic suicide. They struggled, e.g., eloped to Europe and then returned to live unconventionally together. They resisted pressure from society to give up. However, in the end, they were still overcome by themselves and could not avoid becoming the victims of their time. Anna is glorious, passionate, authentic, and has a generous heart. That said, "like her lover she presumes too much of herself and the life for which she wishes; she does not realize how much she is part of her cultural and economic milieu."(p.xxii) She was an avant-garde whose thoughts, choices, and actions were not governed by existing rules, but she could not be a total rebel who owed Russian social norms at the time nothing but contempt. She was only a human being who had her limit and made

error. Moreover, unbridled, her passionate nature also became her Achilles' heel and she was overcome by her own passion. Losing hope of her battle for true love and happiness, she committed suicide. Vronsky is passionate, brave and cunning. He could have known himself better before he decided to be a rebel. He trembled before social pressures, and stumbled before existing social norms and laws. He could not resist the seduction of society. He could not reconcile his desire for his so-called "man's rights for freedom" and his responsibility for love. In the name of his rights of freedom, he unintentionally drove his lover to despair. His desire to have their situation "normalized"—that is, married legitimately—and their to-be children to be legitimately his children run into a direct conflict with Anna's "love-only" philosophy. For him, his act was one of a responsible lover. For Anna, it was an indication of the diminishing of love. As a result, he ultimately failed to be the guardian of his lover and their love. It would be unfair to criticize Vronsky as a "shallow man". He was not. He was a full individual as Anna was. He was daring and brave in love as he would be in war. He was only a human being who audaciously challenged tradition and convention on the one hand and willingly be constrained by society on the other hand. He was only a human being caught between a world that refused to leave its historical platform and a world was in horizon but yet to arrive. Love dared lovers to attempt. But love cannot guarantee lovers good fates. The Karenina-Vronsky love was a tragedy whose fate might not be sealed at the outset, but became inevitable in the course because of human thoughts, choices and actions. Frailty, thy name is human, to paraphrase Shakespeare.

With the Karenina-Vronsky love saga as the central thread, dramas of other protagonists also come into play. Conflicts, contradictions, and even absurdity come along with truths. The simple but liberal-minded Levin's aspiration and struggle ended with his enlightenment that he was and would continue to be only a human; as a human he lived, worked, reformed, and made errors. He was an unbeliever in God. But when his wife suffered and in danger, "neither his doubts nor the impossibility of believing with his reason—of which he was conscious—at all prevented his appealing to God."(p.834). Humans, all too human, as Nietzsche would say. The "normal" bureaucrat Karenina struggle to flourish in society amid family-breaking down. He advanced and advances in his ambitions for rank, status, wealth, powers and so on, but alienated more and more from his self and continued to turn himself into a thing-like being. The Aristocratic Stephan Arkadyevich Oblonsky committed adultery and had a love affair with his children's governess. He believed that his wife Dolly Oblonskaya ought to forgive him, if not for the sake of their children but at least for a consideration of justice. In his part, he struggled with himself about whether he should go to his wife to ask for forgiveness: "'To go, or not to go?' he asked himself; and his inner consciousness answered that he ought not to go; that it could only result in hypocrisy; that it was impossible to restore their relations because it was impossible to render her attractive and capable of exciting love, or to turn him into an old man incapable of love. Nothing except hypocrisy and falsehood could now result—and these were repugnant to his nature."(p.11) Meanwhile, the lights of cultural and historical milieu are continuously on, further dramas of further

protagonists start following the conclusions of the dramas of some protagonists and during the performances of others, making society and the world as their battlegrounds. One after another, Tolstoy's protagonists become living philosophers of humanity—its best and its worst—in time and space. Love is the main theme of the novel, but humanity is the subject-matter that organizes the novel in whole. It is humanity in living, in revealing, and in searching that one reads throughout the novel.

Not surprisingly, free thoughts flourished in Russian society during this period as mushrooms thrived after rains. At that time, freethinker needed not be “a man brought up with ideas of religion, law, and morality, who himself, through struggle and pain, had attained freedom of thought.”(p.551). A freethinker could be any person from a man to a woman, from a university professor to a blacksmith, or from a judge, provincial marshal to a farmer. Not surprisingly, Tolstoy's Anna was, alike various others, a free thinker. She loved Vronsky. But her love did not hold her away from her liberal thoughts on love, marriage, family, woman's education and various other subject-matters, thoughts that run into sharp conflict with Vronsky's. Human beings need thoughts as they need air. They need fresh thoughts as they need fresh air. Thoughts and beliefs are powerful. New thoughts defy regulation, tradition, culture, society or the way that things are and have been. They disregard the distinction between right and wrong. They arise. They flourish. They battle their ways into society and culture. And they work in humans or they effect on humans.

What is to live as a human being? Tolstoy raised the question at the outset of the novel as Victor Hugo did in his novels. How one ought to live one's life? The hedonist Oblonsky felt that in comparison to people in Moscow who merely existed or vegetated, people in Petersburg “lived, really lived.”(p.857). Oblonsky was not a rebel. However, for him, people in Moscow merely existed or vegetated because people in Moscow existed as thing-like beings to whom love retired, happiness was irrelevant. For him, in Moscow, there were cafés, omnibuses and societies, but no really living people. The liberal-minded Levin also found that people in Moscow did not live, but spent and waste time. For him, a life in Moscow life was too empty to be “living”. Once started their rebellion, Anna found that she could not “live” in Moscow while Vronsky could not live happily in country as Anna hoped that he could with the irony that country gave him the freedom he did not appreciate but aspired for the so-called man's rights of freedom which he could found only in society. Anna could not live in Moscow because her human dignity was insulted and her personhood was insulted. Vrosky could not be living in country because his life did not give him full sense of self-fulfillment. For him, life in country was not exciting enough because he as a man was not fully living as a man. Other human questions are raised too. For example, what is love? What is human feeling? What is the relation between human nature and human feelings? What are rights? Who have rights? What is freedom? What is responsibility? Tolstoy claimed that his heroes and heroines be truths. In effect, they were questions! They embodied questions of humanity of his time and all times.

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